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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES IRATE WITH CITY POLLS SCHEDULE

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The Election Commission (EC) announced June 21 that local elections would be held in 13 cities August 4, evoking immediate opposition from the major political parties. The Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) assert that the Government seeks to hold local elections to change the political landscape in its favor before Parliamentary polls in December. Indeed, the BNP plans to go to court to stop the Caretaker Government from holding the municipal vote. The Government, however, believes holding non-partisan local elections before the Parliamentary polls can loosen the major parties' grip on local politics and thereby boost efforts to decentralize governance and establish grass-roots accountability. The Government announced it would relax certain provisions of the Emergency Power Rules (EPR) to allow candidates to campaign for about three weeks before the election. Ultimately, the parties may participate in the local elections out of political expediency.

MUNICIPAL ELECTION DATE SET

¶2. (SBU) The EC announced that local elections in the divisional capitals of Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, and Sylhet, and in the smaller cities of Manikganj, Chuadanga, Shariatpur, Naohata, Dupchachiya, Sripur, Fulbaria, Golapganj, and Sitakundu will occur August 4. The EC set July 3 as the deadline for filing applications, July 6 and 7 for the review of those applications, and July 13 as the deadline for withdrawing. Meanwhile, the Home Ministry relaxed certain provisions of the EPR, which had banned political gatherings since the Caretaker Government came to power in January 2007, to allow election campaigning in the municipalities for about three weeks before the vote. Although municipal elections are non-partisan, the political parties unofficially nominate candidates and campaign for them.

¶3. (SBU) The incumbent mayors of Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet are in prison on charges of graft and extortion. Khulna Mayor Sheikh Tayebur Rahman and Rajshahi Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu have been convicted, while the courts have accepted charge-sheets against Sylhet Mayor Badruddin Ahmed Kamran and Barisal Mayor Mujibur Rahman Sarwar. EPR provisions do not allow Rahman and Minu to run for office because of their convictions; similarly, a city corporation ordinance approved by the Caretaker Government bars the two other mayors from running for public office because of the charges filed against them.

POLITICAL PARTIES PROTEST POLLS SCHEDULE

¶4. (SBU) Leaders of the BNP and Awami League immediately demanded the Caretaker Government cancel the planned municipal elections.

BNP Secretary General Khandker Delwar Hossain told media that the constitution did not allow the Caretaker Government to organize any poll other than Parliamentary elections. (Note: In fact, the constitution does not address this issue. It lays out the responsibility of the Caretaker Government to hold Parliamentary elections. End note.) Awami League Acting President Zillur Rahman called the scheduled municipal elections "a farce" but did not explicitly say his party would boycott the vote.

PUBLIC COMMENTS VS. PRIVATE VIEWS

15. (SBU) Awami League Acting General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam told the Embassy his party's policy-making bodies would decide how to proceed by June 26. "There is a possibility that we will ask our leaders to participate," Islam said. Awami League Presidium member Tofail Ahmed also told us that his party ultimately would take part in local government elections. BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan said his party had yet to decide on a course of action, adding that decisions would be made after getting guidance from Khaleda Zia, the party leader and former prime minister who is in jail on corruption charges. Still, he believed the BNP was likely to boycott the polls. BNP activist Barrister Nawshad Jamir said the party would go to court within two weeks to challenge the constitutionality of the Caretaker Government holding local government elections.

16. (SBU) Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Shamsul Huda and government advisers have reassured parties that holding local government elections would not delay Parliamentary elections. Major political parties, however, said they were worried that the military

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was trying to create its own nationwide political network of hand-picked candidates willing to support the regime's reform agenda. Some political parties, including the Jatiya Party headed by former military dictator Ershad, however, have announced support to the EC schedule for city polls. According to some press accounts, the announcement of the polls schedule has aroused some degree of interest among local party officials and citizens despite opposition from the major political figures.

COMMENT: PARTY POSITIONS COULD CHANGE

17. (SBU) If the Awami League believes the candidates it supports can run strongly, cold political calculations may ultimately result in it moving away from current opposition to the municipal elections. The BNP's early threat to resist those elections may simply reflect the fact it is in no shape to mount an effective campaign while split between Khaleda Zia loyalists and reformists. The BNP's decision ultimately may depend on whether the government reaches political deal that would spring the BNP leader and her two ailing sons from jail. The Caretaker Government, meanwhile, sees the holding of municipal and upazilla elections before the Parliament vote as a means to establish accountable leaders at the local level. This would prevent the future MP's from ensuring the election of their cronies at the local level, thereby diminishing the centralization of previous governments that contributed to Bangladesh's endemic corruption.